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CHICAGO AND THE "GREAT MIGRATION"

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"I trained like hell the day I left there," recalled Milt Hinton of his departure from Mississippi in 1918. Like thousands of other African-Americans leaving the South during and immediately after World War I, Hinton was heading to Chicago. His uncle had made the journey eight years earlier, quickly finding a job as a porter in a hotel. Uncle Bob sent money back to Mississippi, envelopes with ten-dollar bills wrapped in newspaper. One by one, Bob's brothers and sisters joined him, each contributing part of their earnings toward helping those remaining in the South with their basic living expenses. What was left over was put aside for a northbound ticket for the next migrant. Women seem to have been more reluctant than men to travel alone, and Hinton's mother shared a train ride with the Reverend Jones. Eight-year-old Milt remained behind with his grandmother, and soon he was receiving clothes sent by his mother, who had quickly found a job. After two years of working in Chicago, she had accumulated enough to establish a home for her family and to pay for their transportation north. Forced to ride in the "Jim Crow" car when they boarded dripping wet, they endured the long ride without a chance to properly dry themselves or their clothes. When Hinton's mother and two of her brothers met them at the station, "we all looked so bad." But they were in Chicago.

Milt Hinton went on to a distinguished musical career. Thousands of other African-Americans, less visible in the historical record, took a similar journey during the second and third decades of the twentieth century. From southern cities, farms, and small towns they boarded trains after packing their meager belongings into flimsy luggage or even cloth sacks more appropriate to picking cotton. Some stopped along the way, but seldom for long. "The mecca was Chicago," recalled Hinton.

Other northern cities attracted newcomers as well. This was not an entirely new phenomenon; black southerners had been moving north ever since the northern states prohibited slavery during the years following the American Revolution. But the numbers were small then and remained so even after Emancipation. Many northern states, including Illinois,

discouraged freed men and women from migrating northwards. Anyway, for black southerners, Reconstruction was a time of faith in a southern future, with most envisioning lives as independent farmers, dealing with white folks as little as possible. Others looked to southern cities, to opportunities in crafts, commerce, and even domestic service (but this time for wages!) as the foundation of freedom. Cities offered greater opportunity for education and political participation, but even in the countryside freed blacks began to build small rural schools and assert their right to vote. The collapse of Reconstruction shattered visions of impending full citizenship, but did not push black southerners north. Most persisted in their dream of landownership, despite the system of tenancy that left most black southerners either in debt or with only a few dollars at the end of each year. Freedmen remained agriculturally oriented, moving into promising new areas of cotton cultivation in Mississippi, Arkansas, and east Texas. Those who thought about leaving the South tended to cast their visions westwards toward Kansas where nearly 25,000 black "Exodusters" traveled in the early 1880s. Thousands more thought about leaving but lacked the resources. But the agrarian hopes of the freedmen remained unfulfilled by their grandchildren.

Life in the black South became even more constricted in the 1890s, as southern white businessmen and landlords became increasingly worried about the possibility of political alliances between white and black farmers. In state after state, legislatures and constitutional conventions made it virtually


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Robert Abbott, founder and first editor of *Chicago Defender*

impossible for African-Americans to vote. Political elimination was accompanied by legislation designed to remind black southerners of their place as second-class citizens. Between 1890 and 1910, every state south of the Mason-Dixon line, from the Atlantic Coast to Texas and Oklahoma, established a "Jim Crow" system of race relations. Laws required railroad stations to provide one waiting room for whites, one for blacks (or blacks would wait outside); trains were to have separate cars. On streetcars, whites were seated from the front, blacks from the rear.

The regulations branched out into nearly all aspects of life, especially in cities where informal rules and habits of race relations were most vulnerable to black self-assertion. Laws even specified the size and shape of the signs marking "white" and "colored" restrooms, drinking fountains, doorways, and stairways. Public facilities routinely either segregated blacks or excluded them. The place that Jim Crow laws defined for

black southerners was invariably separate and unequal and would remain so through the middle of the twentieth century. African-Americans exercised "no rights that a white man need respect."

Disfranchisement and segregation inspired much of the first acceleration of black migration from South to North in the 1890s. But the increase was small, came largely from the states of the "Upper South," and lasted less than a decade. Despite the many reasons that African-Americans might wish to leave the South, there were few attractions drawing them North. Farming was impossible: expensive land and widespread mechanization required more capital than black southerners could obtain. Moreover, African-Americans simply were not welcome in northern rural communities.

Cities like Chicago, on the other hand, contained established African-American communities dating from the years before the Civil War. These communities also suffered from racial discrimination, with blacks limited in where they could live, shop, and work. Nevertheless, compared with their counterparts in the South, black Chicagoans enjoyed better schools, greater access to other public facilities and leisure activities, voting rights, and the ability to live from day to day without suffering the indignities of Jim Crow. What limited greater migration from the South was the difficulty of making a living. The rapidly expanding steel mills and packinghouses in Chicago, like factories in other cities, employed mainly immigrants from Europe. Industrialists hired according to a sophisticated theory of race, one that presumed that each "race" had its particular aptitudes. Slavs, Italians, Poles, Jews: each was considered a "race," and each tended to find employment partly according to conventional stereotypes of who was best at heavy work, who had dexterity, who could handle machinery. Eastern and southern Europeans were thus relegated to the worst industrial jobs; African-Americans were virtually excluded. In the first decade of the twentieth century most black Chicagoans worked in service positions, cleaning and cooking, pushing brooms, and serving meals. These jobs were often insecure and difficult to obtain. Few black Chicagoans encouraged their friends and relatives to join them. Even the *Chicago Defender*, which later would become the primary cheerleader for northward migration, advised black southerners to fight racism in the South rather than seek new homes. "The southland is rich and fertile," advised editor Robert Abbott. He and other prominent black Chicagoans saw no advantage in an influx of unemployable men and women likely to become a burden on the community.

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In 1916, however, a combination of circumstances occasioned by World War I opened a new set of possibilities, a new future for African-Americans. Nations at war in Europe wanted to buy American industrial products. "Preparedness," President Woodrow Wilson's program that anticipated America's entry into the war, stimulated the domestic economy. Northern industrialists could make big profits if they could boost production rapidly; to do so they needed more workers. But the war had stifled European immigration, eliminating the usual source of additional labor. Casting about for possibilities, employers opened their gates to white women and, with some trepidation, to African-Americans. The mobilization of the American armed forces in 1917 drew even more white workers out of factories, opening still more

opportunities.

These jobs, in railroad yards, steel mills, packinghouses, and other industries, paid wages far beyond what was available in either the rural or urban South. With schools, voting booths, legal rights, and no formal segregation laws, northern cities held out to black southerners the prospect of living with "all the privilege that the whites have," as one New Orleans woman declared before heading for Chicago.

So they moved, approximately 500,000 black southerners between 1916 and 1919, and twice that many in the following decade. Chicago alone received approximately 50,000 to 75,000 black newcomers. This movement, often called the "Great Migration," would ebb and flow until the 1970s, shifting the center of gravity for African-American culture from the rural South to the urban North. Southern cities also attracted many black men and women from the nearby countryside, but the best opportunities lay in the North. Not only were wages higher, but southern cities offered no respite from Jim Crow, poor schools, and second-class citizenship. Northward migration, by contrast, was seen by some as a "Second Emancipation." Some migrants stopped their watches when they crossed the Ohio River; others placed triumphant banners on the sides of their trains, or walked proudly, if sometimes nervously, out of the Jim Crow car.

Both the nervousness and the pride often reflected the circumstances under which migrants had left their southern homes. Dependent not only on black labor, but also on the surplus necessary to pick cotton and to keep men's wages low enough to force black women to work outside the home, white southerners sought to stem the tide of black migration. While some promoted mild reforms to provide an incentive to stay, the most dramatic white response came in the form of obstacles thrown in the paths of migrants. Ticket agents refused to accept the prepaid tickets that earlier migrants sent to their relatives in the South. Police herded travelers from platforms, detaining them temporarily until their train had passed through the station. Landlords made sure that tenants had even fewer opportunities than usual to acquire cash. Most importantly, and with least effect, southern communities cracked down on "labor agents."

Contemporary white observers in the North and South had a simple explanation for the Great Migration: new jobs had opened in the North, and black southerners, swept up by the tide of economic change, had been drawn northward like iron filings to a magnet. The broom that propelled them into these new jobs was the recruitment efforts of labor agents, representatives of northern industries who enticed passive black southerners to make the move. White southerners were certain that "their negroes"— their loyal servants and sharecroppers—docile by nature, readily accepted this interpretation. It corroborated their assumption that "outside agitators" always lay behind actions taken by blacks that seemed to constitute a rejection of the southern systems of race relations and sharecropping.

But in fact, especially for those heading to big cities like Chicago, there were few labor agents. If southern harassment of migrants could exacerbate the anxieties experienced by most people leaving their homes for a distant destination, the real dynamic of migration could compel pride among those heading North—pride in their participation in a movement whose roots, energy,

and resources were drawn not from outside forces but from within the community itself. The Great Migration was not something that happened to Americans; it was something that Americans made happen. The story of a group from Hattiesburg, Mississippi, suggests the elements of this active, rather than passive, migration process.

Like other towns and cities across the South, Hattiesburg was a busy place on


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Saturdays. Men and women came in from the countryside to buy provisions and socialize. One popular gathering spot, Robert Morion's barbershop, featured an additional attraction: the *Chicago Defender*, which was sold at the shop and often the topic of conversation. The most widely circulated black newspaper in the South, the Defender had a reputation among its readers as a fearless spokesman for what it called "the race." Editor Robert Abbott gave prominent attention in its pages to Pullman porters, barnstorming black baseball teams, and entertainers. By 1916 these "traveling salespeople" had helped the *Defender* build a substantial following in towns and cities across the South. When jobs become available in Chicago, the *Defender* became the loudest champion of migration, inviting "all to come north." Newcomers earning wages would bring money into the community and would provide votes for black politicians, who in 1915 had finally secured a place in the city council. Frequent notices referring to people leaving towns and cities, along with front-page articles about the exodus, suggested to readers that migration was less an individual act than a group experience. To fuel the bandwagon, Abbott even set a date, May 15,1917, for a "Great Northern Drive."

Horton and his customers learned from the *Defender* about Chicago's schools, jobs, movie theaters, and other attractions. At the same time, front page banner headlines reminded them of the lynchings and mob violence that hung as a threat even over southern black communities whose experience had not yet progressed from the subtle and mundane affronts of Jim Crow to outright racial terrorism. Perhaps Horton also shared excerpts from letters that he received from a brother who had moved to Chicago nearly two decades earlier. Many such letters were read aloud in southern homes, churches, and other gathering places. Visiting New Orleans in late 1916, Horton sought out the familiar barbershop atmosphere and encountered a labor agent. He declined the offer of free transportation but returned home continuing to think about his dissatisfaction with life in Hattiesburg, despite his relatively substantial income of $25 per week—approximately three to five times what a laborer might earn.

Horton decided to make the move in January 1917, but he determined not to make the journey alone. Discussing the proposition with others, probably in the barbershop as well as in church and at home, he recruited nearly forty men and women to join his family in a migration club. This arrangement permitted the group to secure a group discount on the Illinois Central Railroad. Soon after arriving in Chicago he opened the Hattiesburg Barber Shop, which became a popular gathering place for migrants from Mississippi.

A businessman and a deacon of the First Baptist Church in Hattiesburg, Horton commanded respect back home, and he soon started receiving letters asking advice about the wisdom of migration to Chicago. He passed along the names and addresses to a Chicago boardinghouse keeper who had kept a similar establishment in Hattiesburg. She wrote letters offering rooms to new arrivals, and her home apparently served as an initial stopping place for scores of newcomers from southeastern Mississippi.

Horton, along with other deacons, also corresponded with the pastor of Hattiesburg's First Baptist Church. At first, Reverend Perkins had opposed migration, a position common among a southern black leadership reluctant to lose its constituency and still loyal to Booker T. Washington's advice to black southerners to "cast down your bucket where you are." Watching his flock dwindle, however, Reverend Perkins finally agreed in late 1917 to "shepherd them" again. By late 1917, three Hattiesburg ministers had reunited with their congregations in Chicago, bringing more migrants in their wake as they headed north.

This pattern, known as "chain migration," was not unusual. Not only were black southerners moving north, but immigrants from other countries also created such links and then used them to facilitate first the journey and subsequently the adaptation to their new homes. Black southerners knew from the *Defender* or from family letters and visits about what kinds of jobs were available in Chicago, but it was kin and community contacts that usually secured that first position in a packinghouse, steel mill, or garment shop.

Migrants would learn that life in Chicago was not always as exciting or as liberating as many inferred from the *Defender* or from relatives who had returned home for visits flashing bankrolls and bragging about life in the big city. Industrialists seldom promoted black workers above the level of semiskilled positions. Schools in black neighborhoods were becoming overcrowded as the board

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of education redrew district lines to keep white and black children as segregated as possible. This process was possible because blacks residential choices were limited to the slowly expanding "Black Belt" on the city's South Side, a smaller ghetto on the West Side, and scattered enclaves elsewhere in the city. Beaches and parks were marked as racial "turf." Few white Chicagoans had any interest in integration or in permitting African-Americans a place at the table in city government or other corridors of power. And in 1919 a race riot sparked by an incident at a beach and escalated by white gangs known as "athletic clubs," left thirty-eight people dead and more than five hundred injured.

In the week after the riot, approximately two hundred African-Americans left Chicago. Still others arrived from the South. Perhaps Chicago could not fulfill the hopes of migrants who had written "Bound for the Promise Land" on the sides of railroad cars. But most newcomers compared their lives with what they had left behind,

rather than with hopes, dreams, or with the worlds of white Chicagoans. For most black Chicagoans work took place in a world dominated by whites; life took place at home. On Chicago's South Side, recalled Mahalia Jackson who arrived in the 1920s, a black worker "could lay down his burden of being a colored person in the white man's world and lead his own life."

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